

Lizards

e Marine Iguana *Amblyrhynchus cristatus*

The Galápagos Marine Iguana is the world's only sea-going lizard, and is found on all of the main islands. There are seven races or subspecies which vary considerably in size and colour from island to island. The ones on Española are the most brightly coloured. Northern Isabela boasts the largest (up to 1.3 m in length) and Genovesa the smallest (up to 75 cm in length). The males are larger and more brightly and distinctively coloured than the females. They are largely black or dark grey. However, the males take on a red or red-green tinge during the mating season. This is particularly evident in the Española race. Some races look to have lichens growing on them, such are the variations in their skin colour. Marine Iguanas have a pronounced crest which is most prominent on the head but runs all the way down their back and tail.

Because it is ectothermic, or cold-blooded, and yet feeds in the cool waters of the Humboldt and Cromwell currents, it must warm up by basking in the sun on the black lava rocks, both before and after feeding trips. To avoid overheating, which would occur if its body temperature exceeded 35°C, it varies its position in relation to the sun, often facing directly into it to reduce its exposure.

The Marine Iguana lives largely on land but feeds inshore and in the intertidal zone at depths of up to about 10 m. It feeds almost entirely on red and green algae but is also known to consume its own faeces as well as those of sea lions and crabs. This diet results in a high intake of salt. To eliminate this excess of salt, they spit out brine through their nostrils. This snorting is the only noise that they make.

The Marine Iguana can remain submerged for 10 minutes or more. It does not generally venture more than 50 m offshore. During a strong El Niño, when its food supply is severely affected, the population can suffer a very severe drop.

The timing of the mating season varies on different islands but generally starts in December to January, with egg-laying towards the end of the warm season, March and April. The female excavates a nest in the sand, a burrow up to 1-m long, then lays a clutch of up to four leathery elongated eggs, which take between three and four months to incubate. The young are 10-cm long when they emerge and almost entirely black. They are very vulnerable to predation by frigatebirds, herons, hawks and snakes as well as feral cats and dogs on land, and by moray eels and other predators in the water. Survival is quite an achievement. Once they are mature, their only real enemies are hawks and feral cats and dogs.

Best viewed: Common throughout the islands on rocky coasts and cliffs.

1	2
3	4
5	6
7	8
9	10
11	

SUBSPECIES	ISLANDS	CHARACTERISTICS
<i>A. c. cristatus</i> (1, 3, 4)	Fernandina	The first three races form a closely related group in the central and western islands
<i>A. c. hassi</i> (2)	Santa Cruz	
<i>A. c. albemarlensis</i> (5, 6)	Isabela	
<i>A. c. mertensi</i> (7)	San Cristóbal; Santiago	
<i>A. c. sielmanni</i>	Pinta	
<i>A. c. venustissimus</i> (8, 9)	Española	Most brightly coloured
<i>A. c. nanus</i> (10, 11)	Genovesa	Very small, dark colour

Note: numbers relate to photograph positions as indicated by the symbol on the left.

